



# TEXTILE LABOUR ASSOCIATION AHMEDABAD

## An Indigenous Experiment in Trade Union Movement

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The writer is associated for the last twenty-five years with an institution which is called the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad. It is, therefore, rather awkward to write about this experiment in Unionism which is considered from all sides a very great success. I shall try to make this study as objective as possible and I am sure that the institution which has developed gradually under the fostering guidance of Mahatma Gandhiji is by itself such a unique achievement in the field of labour organization that there is no fear of overstating the facts and inference arising therefrom. An attempt is made here to state and describe the brief history and progress of a Labour organization, inspired, conducted and developed under the direct guidance of Gandhiji. The institution is Gandhiji's contribution to the Labour Movement in this country, and Gandhiji himself has referred to the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association as his laboratory for labour work. Smt. Anasuyaben Sarabhai continues to remain as the President of the Association with the active co-operation of Sjt. Shankerlal G. Banker whose silent but diligent day-to-day guidance has been of inestimable value to the healthy growth of trade union movement in Ahmedabad.

## The pre-Union Stage

The city of Ahmedabad is the second largest centre of textile industry next to Bombay. It employs today about a lakh and thirty thousand workers working in nearly 70 mills. Most of the working class has been drawn from the region known as Gujarat and Kathiawar with the sprinkling of immigrants from all over the country. A generation back, the workers working in the industry were in the same unorganized state as in other centres then. The hours of work were inordinately long, the wages were pitifully low, the education was practically nil, the conditions of work in the factories were exacting and humiliating and workers were treated more as adjuncts of machinery than as human beings. Under these appalling conditions the working class consciousness or an initial urge for organized action to improve the conditions could not be expected. The impact of the First World War with its attendant economic disturbances in prices and wages which was not able to keep pace with the rising cost of living created some sort of stir among the working classes. It was this glimpse of slight consciousness which was canalised into what is now known as the Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad.

Smt. Anasuyaben, the President, who had gone to Europe just before the War returned from England at the beginning of the War with definite ideas of social service among the poorer people of her city. She took up the educational activities

and started a few night-schools imparting education to the workers with the help of a few friends who assisted her. Her work would have possibly been limited to education and social activity, had it not been for an accident which put on her the responsibility of conducting one of the biggest organizations in the country.

The warpers of Ahmedabad mills who were agitating for wage increase to compensate for a steep rise in the cost of living, approached this friend of the poor, and requested her to lead them in their struggle against the employers. With great hesitation, as was natural, she took the lead, and conducted a strike which ultimately resulted in success. While conducting this strike and negotiating for the settlement of the dispute, she got the guidance and help from Mahatmaji who had then taken up his abode in Ahmedabad. It was this event which gave the principle of arbitration which was to play an important role in the settlement of disputes between capital and labour in Ahmedabad, particularly and other centres generally. This event is being annually celebrated by the Ahmedabad workers as a Day of awakening and birth of organized consciousness. The Ahmedabad workers have never imitated others or gone to the West to draw their inspiration. The May Day has had no meaning for them, but they know the 4th of December and observe it as '*Majoor Din*' (Labour Day) to commemorate the birth of a new organized life.

## Gandhiji Leads a Strike

Ahmedabad was destined to draw the attention of the whole country in the year 1918 to an epic struggle which Gandhiji himself conducted on behalf of the employees against the employers who were adamant. The cost of living was rising in the closing years of the First European War and the weavers of Ahmedabad were experiencing very great hardships. They made a demand for a rise in wages to compensate them for the rise in the cost of living. The employers were as usual reluctant to satisfy the workers who approached Gandhiji through Smt. Anasuyaben. Gandhiji studied their case, and advised them to place their case before arbitration and if arbitration is not acceded to, they should be prepared to fight for their just demand; but at the same time to be also ready to accept the arbitration, any time, it is offered. If this principle was acceptable to the workers, he promised to lead them. The employers expressed their willingness to accept arbitration. In the meantime, however, workers of some mills grew impatient, and stopped work. Gandhiji persuaded them to resume work; but the millowners who had reluctantly agreed to arbitration, took up this as an excuse to riggle out of the principle of arbitration, and declared a lockout. Workers had no option. Thus commenced an epic struggle, in which Gandhiji laid down certain fundamental principles which have a permanent value for all Trade Unions.

The struggle lasted for about 20 days during the course of which Gandhiji, by speeches and

writings, kept up the morale of this organized mass action. The workers were asked to take a pledge not to return to work unless the demand was acceded to, or in the alternative, arbitration was accepted. The workers after a few days began to waver and grew diffident. Seeing this situation, the employers lifted the lock-out and declared that the mills will work on their own terms, without caring to take the representatives of the workers into confidence.

Echoes of weakness and doubt were brought to the ears of Gandhiji, and the signs of slackening of the morale among the workers, who were until now not accustomed to methods of peaceful, disciplined and organized resistance for a long period, were visible. According to Gandhiji, organised and peaceful mass action based on self sacrifice is the only method available to the downtrodden to get social justice. Therefore, the hesitancy and the weakening of morale naturally came as a shock to Gandhiji who one morning declared before the workers that he would fast unto death unless the demands were satisfied. The fast was, as he clarified, not undertaken against the employers, but against the workers who had taken the pledge and not recognised its significance. 'A leader,' he said, 'ought to know whether his followers can keep the pledge, which was solemnly taken and which ought to be adhered to.' The country was, for the first time, awakened to a struggle that was going on in one quarter of the country.

The fast had naturally an electric effect on the workers. The weak among them were strengthened, and there was an all round activity among them to continue the peaceful fight till the objective was reached. The millowners were being pressed from all sides to accept arbitration and make it possible for Gandhiji to give up his fast. As Gandhiji was not slow to admit that, though the fast was undertaken primarily more as a leader of workers who were slackening, it was true that it would act as a coercive measure for the employers. Both the parties were adamant, and Gandhiji repeatedly told the employers not to yield on his account alone. However, with the help of Acharya Anandshanker Dhruva settlement was brought about, and the question in dispute was referred to the sole arbitration of Acharya Dhruv himself. Acharya Dhruv, after hearing both the parties, gave his Award which conceded the full demand of the workers. Thus ended an epic struggle which was to leave very deep impressions on the working class in Ahmedabad, and which was to play an important role, brought into existence for both the parties, traditions, conventions, usages and the technique of settlement of disputes which could not be ignored by either side whenever any dispute arose in future.

### **Fundamentals of Labour Movement**

The hectic period of the above—mentioned struggle, and the period following it which really led to the foundation of the labour organisation in Ahmedabad, was responsible for formulation of cer-

tain principles by Gandhiji, who himself conducted the strike, the lock-out, and negotiated the settlements. The principles then laid down have a permanent value for all interested in Trade Union work, and which have been followed more or less by the Ahmedabad workers for the last 25 years. These are being summarised below:—

1. The workers or their leaders should not exaggerate their demands; they should study the *pros* and *cons* of the case carefully before formulating their demands. They should always be ready for correction if the opposite party is able to convince that the workers are in the wrong.

2. The weapon of strike which is really the very last weapon in the armoury of the industrial workers should not be resorted to unless all peaceful and constitutional methods of negotiations, conciliation, and arbitration are exhausted. Even during the course of a strike, workers should be prepared for any just settlement or a reference to arbitration.

3. Peaceful and non-violent behaviour even under provocation is the *sine qua non* for obtaining justice through any mass struggle of this type. The workers, while on strike, should see that they do not damage the property or injure the person of anybody. They should not bear ill-will to their employers, or their officers, as the workers are fighting the evil in the employers, and not the employer personally.



4. The workers should be self-respecting and therefore, they should not rely on the funds raised by the sympathisers for successful conduct of a strike. A worker on strike should find out any other alternative occupation to maintain himself and his family during this period, and no type of work should be considered as low or below one's dignity. A weaver may, therefore, cheerfully accept to make roads or do any manual work during the period of unemployment.

5. A strike is a form of 'Satyagraha,' a striker, therefore, would not submit to superior force or hardships; once he resolves, he keeps firm to it and even at the cost of privations including starvation, he sticks to the resolution.

6. While on strike, the worker should be truthful, courageous, just, and free from hatred or malice towards anybody, and should be prepared for the voluntary sacrifice putting his faith in God.

The worker is a co-owner in the Industry, and as such his responsibility to the Industry and the community is great.

Gandhiji has enjoined on those who work for labour not to behave as if they are pleaders of the workers whether they are right or wrong. If the workers go wrong, it is the duty and responsibility of those who claim to guide them to point that out to them, and should be prepared even to sever their relations with them if the workers insist on doing wrong or resort to violent methods. Gandhiji believes in positive organized

strength, and therefore, all his instructions were aimed at the creation of such strength. His approach is calculated to awaken in the working class consciousness latent in them, so that by the development of his personality, he will be able to hold his own against any injustice or tyranny from the side of the employer or the State. He, therefore, in course of his instructions to the workers laid emphasis on the constructive activities which go to make up the deficiency in the workers as a useful citizen in the society. Gandhiji has, therefore, called upon the Unions in Ahmedabad to concentrate on the activities like education, medical aid, removal of untouchability, abstinence from drink, removal of indebtedness, proper use of wages, good treatment towards women and children, and in short, all the activities calculated to remove all the evils that have crept in domestic as well as social life of the workers. Gandhiji's precepts mentioned above are being carried out by the Ahmedabad workers to the best of their ability, relying for the resources to finance them on the fund which they themselves collect. The meticulous attention that is being paid by the Unions to this aspect of trade union work is reflected in the progress which the workers of Ahmedabad have made during the last 25 years.

### **Principle of Arbitration.**

The most outstanding contribution of Gandhiji in the realm of trade union movement is, however, the principle of arbitration which he, as an arbi-

trator, in most of the Ahmedabad disputes, has developed to a great extent. If once the principle of peaceful solution of the disputes between capital and labour is accepted, there is no escape from arbitration. The arbitration reflects the prevailing public opinion in the matter of disputes between two conflicting interests. Arbitration, seeks to bridge the wide gulf between the two sections of the society by making workers more responsible on the one hand, and making the employers consider themselves not as individual profiteers but as servants, as both of these factors are, in the ultimate analysis, servants of the society. The principle of arbitration enunciated by Gandhiji, a generation back is being adhered to by both the parties and that has brought about the phenomenal growth of the Industry in Ahmedabad and its rapid progress. The workers have also been enabled to improve their economic and social conditions to a very great extent compared with their comrades elsewhere. It is pertinent to note here that while workers in Ahmedabad were getting about 20 per cent. less wages in the year 1920, as compared to Bombay, they are to-day assured of a wage which is higher by about 10 per cent. This phenomenon is, in our opinion, entirely due to the long spell of industrial peace which is apparently the result of the machinery of arbitration.

A generation is a fairly long period for the industry to pass through all the phases and the recurring trade cycle necessitating adjustment in wage-structures to meet the exigencies. This process has comparatively been more peaceful in

Ahmedabad where parties voluntarily resorted to arbitration. The dislocation of the industry and the resulting unemployment and starvation could be avoided by adhering to the principles of arbitration which through experience has been found to fulfil the just and reasonable aspiration of the working classes. The process of arbitration, as it has been our experience, has during the course of proceedings evolved a system by which the so-called trade secrets and statistics relating to costing, wages, profits and its various components have to be displayed, and workers have earned the right to examine, analyse and criticise the propriety or otherwise of the financial transactions in the Industry. The experience gained in the working of this machinery, which has worked in the interest of the working class has now been utilized in the enactment of a law by the Bombay Government. The present Industrial Relations Act modifies the principles, procedure, rights and liabilities of employers and employees as they were evolved in Ahmedabad through experience.

### **Growth of the Trade Union Movement in Ahmedabad.**

Early in 1920, the workers realised that they should form Unions to improve their social conditions on the lines chalked out by Gandhiji through constructive activities. They, therefore, established the different occupational Unions federated into the industrial unit known as the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association. The Association together with

its multifarious activities, such as, education, medical aid, recreation, libraries, physical culture, prohibition, civics etc, are entirely financed by the subscriptions collected by workers' own representatives from the members. The membership, as it stands at present is about 75,000 with a monthly subscription of about Rs. 56,000. The workers pay their subscription to their representatives in the mill premises—a right they have earned after a prolonged struggle. The Association had conducted, during the course of its career, numerous strikes in individual and groups of mills—some of which were carried on for a period of over six months. This was naturally the case where the employers did not accept the arbitration. It need not be stated that all these strikes were entirely peaceful and the Association had never to experience any interference from the Police authorities or the State. In passing, it should be mentioned that most of these strikes, numbering more than 150, were successful and the entire failure of a strike involving demoralization has fortunately never been the experience of the Ahmedabad worker. All these strikes were authorized and conducted by the Unions after ascertaining the wishes and will of those who are to be called upon to make these sacrifices. During the course of this long period of organization, the Association had to face the usual hostility and active opposition of recalcitrant millowners resueting in hundreds of victimizations. Every victimization—small or great—was taken up by the Association as a matter of vital importance for the existence of the organiza-

tion, and all these victimization cases were taken to its logical conclusion, and ultimately decided either by strikes or by arbitration. It is a matter of satisfaction to mention that most of the victimized people, numbering hundreds in a series of years, were re-instated in their own mills. This phenomenon, which every Trade Union has to undergo is a test for the organization, and the success which has been attained in the settlement of these disputes, added tremendous strength to the organization. The success of the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association in all fields of its activities whether social economical or industrial was such that it attracted the attention of workers from centres in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Central India who asked for its assistance which was very willingly given by the Ahmedabad workers—they have very liberally contributed towards the initial expenses of organizing workers in those centres,—which are now entirely self-supporting in the matter of finance. It has always been a sound principle laid by the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association that all the Unions, in order to have self-respect and to be effective in the discharge of their duties should be self-reliant for their funds. All these Unions have now been knitted together into a National Textile Labour Federation which claims to have a membership of about a lakh and seventy thousand. The key-note of the phenomenal progress of the institution and its associated organizations lies in relying solely on wholtime workers trained by the institution in social work, and who do not

attend to any other work, but concentrate all their energies to labour work. These workers attend to day-to-day grievances of the workers, remaining in constant touch with them, and do all sorts of spade work among them so that a spirit of oneness and indentity is created between the leadership and the rank and file. The work of the Association is entirely conducted on democratic lines through a Board of Representatives elected by the members every two years. It has been the experience of the writer that the representatives so elected are so keen, enthusiastic and conscious that apart from taking lead from us at times, they are in a position, and have actually, on a number of occasions given lead to the institution which by results has proved correct and proper. It is no exaggeration to state that the movement in Ahmedabad is evolved and developed from the soil itself with an indigenous technique and method of tackling various problems which arise from day to day. The representatives so elected scrutinize criticise and help to prepare annual budget of income and expenditure, and are fully conversant with the monetary transactions of the Association which they take delight in supporting and conducting.

### **Contribution to the Labour Movement**

The foregoing paragraphs are written with a view to give a bird's eye view of the origin, growth and progress of an organization which has adopted its own technique, and tried to give this technique

to others. Its achievement is considered remarkable by all those who are interested in labour work, and therefore, a desire was expressed by many wellwishers of labour in different provinces, to set up Unions of this type. The result of this desire was the initiation of the Hindustan Mazdoor Sewak Sangh, which was started primarily with the assistance of the Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association. This body has trained labour workers, who have started and developed Unions in different centres of the country. This has naturally resulted in an urge for a central Trade Union organization working on a common ideology, and following the same technique. This urge could not be resisted, and the natural outcome was the establishment of a central labour organization in the country based on principles of non-violence and truth and reliance on peaceful methods for settlement of disputes. The Indian National Trade Union Congress established in May 1946 thus owes its origin to the initial start by Mahatma Gandhiji of a new technique of Trade Union work at Ahmedabad. This organization has now affiliated to it. Unions with a membership of about a million workers and its provincial branches have been established in almost all provinces. It is hoped that the new organization will meet adequately the aspirations of the working class in the new era that has been ushered in by the removal of the foreign administration. The aim of the new organization is to organize the working class of the country on sound trade union lines that they may be enabled to



contribute their due share in the reconstruction of the Society that has been envisaged in the new Constitution:

### **Political and Civic Consciousness:**

The working classes of Ahmedabad along with the workers of the centres with which they are associated are a solitary exception throughout the country in the matter of their civic and political consciousness. They, of their own volition as citizens, have taken active part in all the movements launched for removing the foreign domination. Some of them have gone to jail, others had to face *lathi*-blows, and still others were victims to repression. The unique contribution which the Ahmedabad workers had made in the year 1942 has no parallel in the annals of history. They abstained from work for more than 100 days on a call from Gandhiji, and it must be said to their credit that the huge sacrifice of about 3-1/2 crores of rupees in wages alone was willingly made in the cause of the fight for freedom. They came out of this struggle more determined, better organized and better equipped for the part they have to play in future India. It must be noted here that the workers of Ahmedabad not only contributed their mite in the political struggle as citizens but they also have been taking active share in the civic administration of the local Municipality. Beginning with a single member elected from the general Constituency in 1924, to-day seventeen workers who are working in the local mills as operatives

in different occupations, are elected to the Municipality from General Constituencies. A number of them have been elected to the Municipality on the Statutory Committees of the Municipality and they are acquitting themselves very creditably there. Thus the active contribution which the working class in Ahmedabad is making to the civic and political life of the city is a unique tribute to the organization which Gandhiji has created. It has to some extent fulfilled the objectives which Gandhiji had placed before the working class a generation back. Gandhiji's aspiration to make the worker a full-fledged responsible citizen in the Society is to an extent visible. The Society that Gandhiji envisages and in which there will be no classes is capable of being achieved by the technique and method practised by those who strictly adhere to them.

The workers of Ahmedabad have been taking part in the elections to the Ahmedabad Municipality as stated above. The Ahmedabad Textile Unions, owing to their solid and sound trade union membership have been allotted two seats in the Provincial Assembly. In the elections that have been recently held they have elected Sjt. Gulzari Lal Nanda, and Sjt. Khandubhai K. Desai, their Secretaries to the Provincial Assembly and it is a matter of pride to the Ahmedabad workers that Sjt. Gulzari Lal Nanda, one of the Secretaries has been invited to join the Provincial Cabinet to look after the Portfolio of Labour. The

Provincial Assembly has elected Sjt. Khandubhai K. Desai, the other Secretary to the Constituent Assembly of India.

In Passing, it may also be stated that the Ahmedabad workers did not lag behind in making monetary Contributions to the relief of those who were overtaken by natural calamities in the Earthquake in Bihar and the famine and floods in different parts of the country. They had collected and made contributions amounting to thousands of rupees to each of these funds in addition to about a lakh and a half to Kasturba Memorial Fund and Rs. 75,000 to Mahadev Desai Memorial Fund. Any call from the distressed and afflicted part of the country is always being willingly responded to and the workers of Ahmedabad are always ready to share the joy and sufferings and miseries of the countrymen.

The Labour Movement in Ahmedabad is not based on any caste, creed or colour. It is a movement embracing all the diverse castes and communities which form the constituent part of our nation. This broader outlook and its practice in day-to-day activity is responsible to a very large extent for the keeping peace among the working class even when the Communal sentiments are running very high throughout country. It is a matter of deep gratefulness to mention very humbly that Ahmedabad working class has been saved from the communal fury even when the city was afflicted by this disease more than once.

## Majoor Vidyalay

The Ahmedabad workers are alive to the fact that in an independent country, they will be called upon to play their role properly if they are to usher in a new era which removes all exploitation and affords an opportunity to everybody for his alround development. The Association has spent lakhs of to make workers literate, but even then, it must be admitted that much requires to be done in this direction. Even those that are literate have had little opportunity to educate themselves on proper lines. To qualify such persons and enable them to grasp the significance of the national problems and creating them the sense of responsibility towards the industry, and community, the Textile Labour Association thought it necessary to establish the Majoor Vidyalay where the selected representatives of workers—about 250 in number—are taught elements of economics, commercial geography, history, political sciences, principles of labour movement, and Gandhian ideology. The officials of the Textile Labour Association themselves have undertaken to conduct this institution since they have to adopt the method of teaching which may create interest for the adult workers. The first batch has begun its training, since last four months, and the experiment has proved a great success. Workers devote five hours on every weekly holiday for this purpose.

## Labour Co-operative Bank & Insurance

Even in a brief note about the activities fo

the Association it is necessary to point out the efforts made by the Ahmedabad workers to rid themselves from indebtedness through self-help and thrift. A Co-operative Bank was opened last year with workers as Shareholders. It advances loans at reasonable interest to those who are needy and thus save them from the clutches of the Shahukars and the pathans. The Bank has a working capital of Rs. 1,57,000 and has advanced loans amounting to Rs. 2,73,780. Workers punctually repay the advanced loans by instalments and the experiment promises a great source of relief to indebted workers in Ahmedabad, who can with the help of the loan repay old debts at high interest with the help of their own Bank. Recently the Bank has started an Insurance Department, and not only the loan-holders but even other workers are encouraged to insure their lives. In absence of gratuity, pension, Insurance policy would be a welcome relief to a needy family when it is deprived of its bread-winner.

### **Achievements**

The Textile Labour Association is today the largest textile union in the country with a membership of about 80000 who pay subscription ranging from Rs. 0-4-0 to Rs. 1-8-0 per fortnight according to their income. The monthly income from subscription is about Rs. 55000 per month. Elected representatives of workers collect subscriptions on the premises where payment is made. They have secured this right by a series of struggles. The

earnings of textile workers in Ahmedabad are the highest in India. They have been able to achieve this by maintaining peace in the industry, as a result of which industry could also prosper and pay higher wages. This union gave the lead to the country by adopting a sliding scale of dearness allowance fluctuating with the cost of living index. This was the result of a grim determination on the part of the union which finally compelled millowners to accept arbitration of the Industrial Court, on this basis, averting the general strike at the last moment. This method has worked so equitably that inspite of worker having accepted Rs. 77-8-0 per month as dearness allowance, they did not grumble when the amount was subsequently less due to fall in cost of living index. The alterness on the part of the union has saved workers from encroachments on their wages and other rights and secured justice to them without having to resort to general strike.

Even the smallest complaints by the workers whether against mill officials, land lords, Government or Local Authorities are carefully inquired by the Complaints Staff, majority of whom are recruited from among the working classes themselves.

### **Link with the afflicted villager**

Ahmedabad workers are conscious of the fact that their standard of life is comparatively higher than millions of peasants who toil in the villages in India and supply the necessary food to the country. They have therefore always responded to

Cry for help with an instinctive large-mindedness. During the Bihar earthquake, Bengal Famine, misery nearer home in Gujarat due to floods-on all these occasions, they collected moneys and have sent lakhs of rupees in such causes. Nor have they lagged behind in responding to popular appeals. They contributed Rs. 75,000 for the Mahadev Desai Memorial Fund, and Rs.  $1\frac{1}{2}$  lakhs for Smt. Kasturba Gandhi memorial Fund. Recent death of Mahatma Gandhi, the Founder of the Institution, its constant Guide and Advisor and real 'Bapu' to hundreds of them who had come in his personal contact, engulfed them in indescribable sorrow. The Textile Labour Association was the foremost institution in the country to resolve that three days' wages be collected for a suitable Gandhi Memorial Fund. Rs. 11 lakhs were collected almost within a month of his death. Ahmedabad workers know that since Gandhiji calls the Ahmedabad union his Laboratory, their responsibility to work out his ideals is very serious. They have to show the country, the Gandhian way. The money collected will be utilised for this purpose.



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